

You can't detox your body. It's a myth. So how do you get healthy?



There's no such thing as 'detoxing'. In medical terms, it's a nonsense. Diet and exercise is the only way to get healthy. But which of the latest fad regimes can really make a difference?

Whether it's cucumbers splashing into water or models sitting smugly next to a pile of vegetables, it's tough not to be sucked in by the detox industry. The idea that you can wash away your calorific sins is the perfect antidote to our fast-food lifestyles and alcohol-lubricated social lives. But before you dust off that juicer or take the first tentative steps towards a colonic irrigation clinic, there's something you should know: detoxing – the idea that you can flush your system of impurities and leave your organs squeaky clean and raring to go – is a scam. It's a pseudo-medical concept designed to sell you things.

"Let's be clear," says Edzard Ernst, emeritus professor of complementary medicine at Exeter University, "there are two types of detox: one is respectable and the other isn't." The respectable one, he says, is the medical treatment of people with life-threatening drug addictions. "The other is the word being hijacked by entrepreneurs, quacks and charlatans to sell a bogus treatment that allegedly detoxifies your body of toxins you're supposed to have accumulated."

If toxins did build up in a way your body couldn't excrete, he says, you'd likely be dead or in need of serious medical intervention. "The healthy body has kidneys, a liver, skin, even lungs that are detoxifying as we speak," he says. "There is no known way – certainly not through detox treatments – to make something that works perfectly well in a healthy body work better."

With celebrity advocates from Gwyneth Paltrow to Oprah Winfrey, detoxing has become big business.

Yet, inexplicably, the shelves of health food stores are still packed with products bearing the word "detox". You can buy detoxifying tablets, tinctures, tea bags, face masks, bath salts, hair brushes, shampoos, body gels and even hair straighteners. Yoga, luxury retreats, and massages will also all erroneously promise to detoxify. You can go on a seven-day detox diet and you'll probably lose weight, but that's nothing to do with toxins, it's because you would have starved yourself for a week.

Then there's colonic irrigation. Its proponents will tell you that mischievous plaques of impacted poo can lurk in your colon for months or years and pump disease-causing toxins back into your system. Pay them a small fee, though, and they'll insert a hose up your bottom and wash them all away. Unfortunately for them – and possibly fortunately for you – no doctor has ever seen one of these mythical plaques, and many warn against having the procedure done, saying that it can perforate your bowel.

Detoxing foot pads turn brown overnight with what manufacturers claim is toxic sludge drawn from your body. This sludge is nothing of the sort – a substance in the pads turns brown when it mixes with water from your sweat.

“It’s a scandal,” fumes Ernst. “It’s criminal exploitation of the gullible man on the street and it sort of keys into something that we all would love to have – a simple remedy that frees us of our sins, so to speak. It’s nice to think that it could exist but unfortunately it doesn’t.”

That the concept of detoxification is so nebulous might be why it has evaded public suspicion. When most of us utter the word detox, it’s usually when we’re bleary eyed and stumbling out of the wrong end of a heavy weekend. In this case, surely, a detox from alcohol is a good thing? “It’s definitely good to have non-alcohol days as part of your lifestyle,” says Catherine Collins, an NHS dietitian at St George’s Hospital. “It’ll probably give you a chance to reassess your drinking habits if you’re drinking too much. But the idea that your liver somehow needs to be ‘cleansed’ is ridiculous.”

The liver breaks down alcohol in a two-step process. Enzymes in the liver first convert alcohol to acetaldehyde, a very toxic substance that damages liver cells. It is then almost immediately converted into carbon dioxide and water which the body gets rid of. Drinking too much can overwhelm these enzymes and the acetaldehyde buildup will lead to liver damage. Moderate and occasional drinking, though, might have a protective effect. Population studies, says Collins, have shown that teetotallers and those who drink alcohol excessively have a shorter life expectancy than people who drink moderately and in small amounts.

“We know that a little bit of alcohol seems to be helpful,” she says. “Maybe because its sedative effect relaxes you slightly or because it keeps the liver primed with these detoxifying enzymes to help deal with other toxins you’ve consumed. That’s why the government guidelines don’t say, ‘Don’t drink’; they say, ‘OK drink, but only modestly.’ It’s like a little of what doesn’t kill you cures you.”

This adage also applies in an unexpected place – to broccoli, the luvvie of the high-street “superfood” detox salad. Broccoli does help the liver out but, unlike the broad-shouldered, cape-wearing image that its superfood moniker suggests, it is no hero. Broccoli, as with all brassicas – sprouts, mustard plants, cabbages – contains cyanide. Eating it provides a tiny bit of poison that, like alcohol, primes the enzymes in your liver to deal better with any other poisons.

Collins guffaws at the notion of superfoods. “Most people think that you should restrict or pay particular attention to certain food groups, but this is totally not the case,” she says. “The ultimate lifestyle ‘detox’ is not smoking, exercising and enjoying a healthy balanced diet like the Mediterranean diet.”

Close your eyes, if you will, and imagine a Mediterranean diet. A red chequered table cloth adorned with meats, fish, olive oil, cheeses, salads, wholegrain cereals, nuts and fruits. All these foods give the protein, amino acids, unsaturated fats, fibre, starches, vitamins and minerals to keep the body – and your immune system, the biggest protector from ill-health – functioning perfectly.

So why, then, with such a feast available on doctor’s orders, do we feel the need to punish ourselves to be healthy?

